

DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers.

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Whole No. 439

SEXTON BLAKE

By W. O. G. Lofts



DIME NOVEL SKETCHES NO. 112

NEW AND OLD FRIENDS

First Series: Publisher: Beadle and Adams. Dates: January 25, 1873 to December 12, 1873. Schedule of Issue: Monthly for first 5 issues and intermittent thereafter. Issues: 15. Price: 10c. Size: 11¼x8". Pages: 16. Illustrations: Two to four black and white illustrations. Contents: Mostly border stories.

New Series: Publisher: Beadle and Adams. Dates: December 30, 1873 to February 21, 1874. Schedule of Issue: Monthly. Issues: 3. Price: 10c. Size: 16½x11¼". Pages: 16. Illustrations: Black and white illustration on cover. Contents: Border stories.

SEXTON BLAKE

By W. O. G. Lofts

FOREWORD

For nearly 75 years millions of readers of all ages have been thrilled by the adventures of SEXTON BLAKE. Since his first appearance in No. 6 of the "Halfpenny Marvel" in December 1893, official records prove that no less than 3,550 original stories have been written by approaching 200 authors of many nationalities. This makes a rough estimate of over 1,200,500,000 words, not counting the millions of words used in reprints and translations into about 20 different languages.

SEXTON BLAKE appeared in stage productions as far back as 1909, the first probably in London's West End at the Prince Edward Theatre, whilst the first film was in 1914. This was a three-reeler entitled "The Clue of the Wax Vesta." The most famous of all Sexton Blake films had its premiere in the thirties at the Ritz Cinema, Leicester Square. At about this period Sexton Blake featured in several radio serials on the BBC, while gramophone enthusiasts could also buy H. M. V. No. C. 2044 recording which had Sexton Blake in an adventure entitled "Murder on the Portsmouth Road." Apart from the SEXTON BLAKE ANNUAL at Christmas time, there was even a Sexton Blake card game to thrill and amuse many.

The year of 1967 saw no sign of the popularity of Sexton Blake declining. Indeed—apart from first being chosen to feature in a new long-running BBC Home Service serial, he broke new ground completely by appearing on Rediffusion's children's programme for another long series.

Sexton Blake was chosen because he is England's greatest detective in fiction, not only because of his skill in detection but because of his high moral code and the good example he consequently set his younger followers.

Shakespeare's famous quotation—"What's in a name?" would seem absurd where Sexton Blake is concerned as never has any character in fiction owed so much to the person who gave him that name. The christian name of Sexton conveys some kind of reverence, being a servant of the church as well as a digger of graves and a ringer of bells—certainly a name to suggest the more sombre elements!

Blake is a name well-known to be connected with famous people in English history; apart from the great poet and painter, William Blake, who can forget Robert Blake, the English Admiral who rendered such valuable service to the Commonwealth?

Who DID create the famous name of Sexton Blake? The following story—pieced together through years of research, brought me more mysteries to solve than Sexton Blake himself.

* *

The once busiest place in Blackfriars now stands empty and neglected. The original buildings which were standing nearly a hundred years ago are seemingly pushed right into the background, with the "FOR SALE" notices outside the top windows. A bright now modern restaurant covers the original entrance, which is at No. 24 Tudor Street, E. C. 4. In all probability a lot of custom is gained from the large number of staff that are housed in the imposing

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Northcliffe House at the side of it.

If one could turn the clock back, say seventy-five years, what a story could be told! It began when a bright young man in his middle twenties with the name of Alfred J. Harmsworth (later Lord Northcliffe) started the present-day FLEETWAY PUBLICATIONS LTD. with his "Answers to Correspondents," later shortened to "Answers,"; and those two world-famous comics, "Illustrated Chips" and "Comic Cuts," closely followed by the "Halfpenny Wonder."

"Answers," the main money-spinning office, was situated at the top of 24, Tudor Street, reached by means of a very steep and narrow staircase. Right opposite the top of the staircase was the office of the editor, occupied by Cecil Harmsworth, later Baron Harmsworth. The other Harmsworth brothers—Harold, later Lord Rothermere (who was in charge of the financial side), Leicester, St. John and Hilderbrand, later Sir Bart, were all helping brother Alfred to build up the future Northcliffe Empire.

As is well-known, apart from firmly believing in giving people value for money, Alfred Harmsworth showed an extremely shrewd faculty for picking the right men for the right jobs—men who in future years were to give unswerving loyalty and devotion to their chief, and who were to become not only editors but managers and even Directors of his famous firm. It was a young man such as this that Harmsworth made his first editor of a boys' paper in 1893; his name was Somers J. Summers, and he was only eighteen years of age.

This new boys' paper was to be entitled "The Halfpenny Marvel Library" and the stories which were to appear each week were to be of pure adventure and good reading, so that even the strictest parent could not possibly object. The opening yarn was entitled "Dead Man's Land," written by S. Clarke Hook, son of a former Governor of Sierra Leone, who was to become one of their greatest contributors through his famous "Jack, Sam and Pete" tales.

It is no secret that Harmsworth was really the driving force behind his editors, and on the lookout for a writer to start off a series of detective yarns for his new venture his eye was caught by a series of articles in the London "Sunday People."

These were entitled "Third Class Crimes" or "The Undiscovered Crimes of London," and they were written by an author named Harry Blyth. When Harmsworth read them he decided that here was the man he wanted. When they met, Harmsworth greeted Blyth by saying, "So you are the crime merchant," to which Blyth replied: "Just as you are the newspaper merchant." Harmsworth was greatly impressed by this, as he always showed a great liking for any man who stood up to him, and he straight away commissioned Blyth to write his detective stories.

In 1955 I was fortunate enough to meet the son of Harry Blyth, likewise named Harry. He was an elderly, white-haired, extremely friendly gentleman living at Broadstairs and probably then approaching 80. In a long interview with him I was able to glean first-hand knowledge on the events which led to his father starting off his series of detective stories.

As a lad in his teens, he could remember distinctly his father coming home from the office one day and asking him what name he liked best for a detective—"Sexton Blake" or "Gideon Barr." Young Harry plumped for "Sexton Blake" and so the first story with the name of Sexton Blake as its principal detective came to be written.

This appeared in No. 6 of "The Halfpenny Marvel Library" dated 20th December 1893, and was entitled the "Missing Millionaire." The pen-name of Hal Meredith was used, the latter part being the surname of his mother.

Harry Blyth junior (now deceased) was of the firm conviction that his father had coined the name of Sexton Blake, and I had the strong impression, during my interview, that he had some kind of chip on his shoulder concerning the fact that a character

who had made so many thousands of pounds for a firm, should have provided the first author and creator with only £9.9s0d—not only for the copyright of the story, but for the character as well.

If his father actually had invented the name, obviously he may have had some justification for this, but the fact has certainly been disputed by at least two former members of the old Harmsworth Press Ltd. The first, William H. Maas, certainly had some official standing, as he was no less a person than the second editor of the "Marvel" around 1897, after the first Somers J. Summers had been promoted to editor of "Answers."

A fact that cannot be disputed in the running of any successful fiction publishing firm is that any ideas, suggestions and presentation of stories are discussed fully as a rule with the editors concerned before the stories are even written. More than not, even the name of the principal character is suggested editorially, or at least improved on from the original.

Mr. W. H. Maas stated that the "original intention was to call the detective Frank Blake, but somehow the first name did not seem 'lurid' enough, and so either Somers J. Summers or even possibly Alfred J. Harmsworth changed this to 'Sexton' Blake, which sounded so much better!"

Curiously enough, even the name of Blake as a detective was not original. One of the chief aims of Harmsworth in bringing out his boys' papers was to try to kill the penny dreadful and this included periodicals published by his chief rival firm, The Aldine Publishing Company. "Jackson Blake" was a very popular American Sleuth who had originally appeared in the U. S. A. Dime Novels, and the Aldine Publishing Company, which mainly reprinted this material in such English boys' papers as Aldine Half Holiday had had such titles of their detective published as "Jackson Blake, the Bouncer Detective."

Possibly Harmsworth, in his crusade against the penny dreadfuls, thought it was a good idea to have

a similarly-named character, as boys who doted on the U. S. A. detective—being ignorant of the wiles of publishers!—may have been tempted to buy his paper, depicting a similar sleuth, under the impression that it had some connection.

William H. Back, who started his career at the old Harmsworth Press and rose to become, in time, Director of Juvenile Publications with the then named Amalgamated Press, always took a more-than-usual interest in Sexton Blake. He maintained that the character had been created by the firm and would always remain the firm's property, his information coming from the big man himself, Alfred J. Harmsworth. It is worth recording that if any man deserved credit for putting Blake on the map, it was he.

After appearing in early editions of the "Marvel," Sexton Blake was switched to the "Union Jack" and W. H. Back made him a regularly weekly feature in 1904—whilst in 1915 he started the long-running "Sexton Blake Library," which is still running today by Howard Baker Publishers Limited.

Harry Blyth, it should be recorded, was more than just an ordinary writer. He was editor of CHIEL (the Scottish "Punch") and was a playwright, having many successful pantomimes, as well as an interest in the Theatre Royal, Glasgow. He only wrote seven Blake stories when he died of typhoid fever, at the early age of 46 in 1898, and did not love to see how famous and successful the character in his first detective yarn was to become.

Strangely enough, many other detectives were created and written about in exactly similar type of stories, with names such as Frank Ferrett, Martin Steele and Gideon Barr, yet all soon passed completely into oblivion.

The most popular assumption about Sexton Blake is that he was based on Conan Doyle's immortal detective Sherlock Holmes. (It is worth recording that he was originally called Sherringham Holmes!) and as a keen

student of both detectives I find this hard to accept.

Blake in his early days lived at New Inn Chambers and in later stories in Wych Street (a turning off the Strand) where he was in partnership with a French detective by the name of Jules Gervaise. More important, whilst that other famous mythical detective of Baker Street, Sherlock Holmes, seemed to solve most of his problems by his own fire-side, clad in a stained dressing-gown and digressing to his somewhat dense admirer, Dr. Watson; Sexton Blake travelled to the four corners of the world to bring his cases to a successful conclusion.

* *

"Mr. Frank Ellaby wishes to see you, sir."

"Good!" answered Mr. Sexton Blake. "Let him come up, and at once."

Those are the immortal first words ever written mentioning the great detective. All the rest is History.

NEWSY NEWS

By Ralph F. Cummings

Been up in Northport, Maine, since the 20th of September and expect to be up here at "Cedar Wall," Herbert E. Kenney's hideaway, where he loves to roam, do as he wants to, and so on, while he is here.

"Cedar Wall" is on "Beech Hill Road," off Route 1 up in Northport, Maine, via Lincolnville, should any one wish to write me, but I guess it wouldn't do any good, as I go back home Oct. 13th. Am having a very nice time of it, going here, there and everywhere—and as a fellow says, ye editor likes a little vacation once in a while.

Sept. 26th went to pay a visit to Mrs. Aimee B. MacEwen, a new member at the "Victorian House, Stockton Springs, Maine" 04981. She is a new member. She was not there when Herbert and myself went up, but her husband was and Bert bought a few books.

On Sept. 30th we went up again, as her husband told us the days she

would be there, so sure enough she was. She is a very pleasant woman, and should anyone want old books, she sure has them. We saw a very rare copy of Laird & Lee's book on "Jesse James," sure was a very rare copy, as I had never seen it before, and I've had a lot of very scarce books on "Jesse James" back along.

Also saw a number of Street & Smith's Alger books in the old Medal Library, as well as a lot of boys books, and large Pluck & Lucks, some Tip Tops small size, as well as some small reprints. May of been more, but I didn't see them.

Bert bought a few more books he wanted—I was able to get some old newspapers, and a few books.

Saw lots of other books I should of bought, but as I have over 25,000 at home already, I guess I have enough to try and sell as it is.

Some of the newspapers were the old 'Bangor Daily Whig and Courier' of 1888.

Mrs. MacEwen will be about the 155th or 6th member of the H. H. Bro. I've met in person, since Ralph P. Smith and myself started it back in 1925.

While at Berts, we've been reading books and old nickel novels galore. My eyes are all O.K. again, or seem to be, because last summer I had to lay off, as they pained and stung me so. My doctor who is 94 years old, told me as long as I was 70 years old, there wasn't much I could do about it, except to bathe my eyes in cold water 2 or 3 times a day, and I been doing just that, and it has helped me a big lot—of course I used some "Murine" for the eyes too, a drop in each eye at night once in a while, and between both cold water and Murine, sure has did the trick. I thought sure my eyes were gone, last summer.

FOR SALE

Various kinds of Sports magazines 1924 and 1938, etc., 35c each.

Eli A. Messier

Box 1122, Woonsocket, R. I. 02895

SOME NOTES TOWARD A STUDY OF NICK CARTER

By J. Randolph Cox

The greatest difficulty in attempting any sort of **definitive** study of Nick Carter is the bad timing. It is simply too late to conduct interviews with the writers and editors and artists. One must rely on letters, the publisher's records, and the stories themselves, plus a general knowledge of how and why things were done the way they were in the world of dime novel publishing. In short (as Mr. Micawber might say) it isn't easy.

Three years ago I bit the bullet, took the bull by the horns, and cast the die into the Rubicon. I began to compile all of the information I could lay my hands on about Nick Carter's career with Street & Smith. A letter was written to Conde Nast (present holders of the copyright on Street & Smith properties) to determine whether anyone had ever attempted such a project, and to request permission to do so. Encouraged by the reply from Mr. Paul Boner, I plunged ahead.

The bibliography was the first step and here I ran into fantastic luck. A list of all the Nick Carter stories in the New York Weekly, as well as in the Nickel weeklies bearing his illustrious name (to say nothing of Nick Carter Magazine, the Magnet, and New Magnet Libraries and the radio scripts) was kindly furnished by Mr. Bonner and Miss Esther Ford at Conde Nast. Unfortunately, it wasn't possible to get a list of Nick Carter's appearances in Detective Story Magazine for the Street & Smith Library was on its way to Syracuse University where it would be unavailable for research until after being properly processed and catalogued.

Fortune smiled. A mere forty miles away from my home was the University of Minnesota with the George Hess Collection of dime novels, story papers, and related popular literature. For nearly two years I have been making weekly trips to the Hess Col-

lection to read, study, and nearly wallow in the adventures of Nick Carter. A card file of data now fills three file drawers and I have only read my way through to Nick Carter Weekly Number 445 (A Millionaire Criminal; Or, Nick Carter's Great Enigma)!

At this point it is still difficult to envision what will find its way into the completed book. One thing seems certain: the figure of Nick Carter will dominate the figures of his creator and the men who chronicled his career. An outline of his career has been shaped by J. Edward Leithead in the series of articles he has written for DNR. The most interesting villains (Dr. Quartz, Dazaar, Caruthers, etc.) are the keys to the series and instead of 1,000 individual stories we can break this down into units: stories dealing with recurring villains, linked stories designed for later publication in the Magnet and New Magnet, stories in which new assistants appear or in which Nick Carter tries to retire (as he did twice) and so on. The prospect of reading all those millions of words does not seem quite so dim anymore.

On the file cards (3x5 for weeklies, 5x7 for serials and Magnet editions) go the title, sub-title, date of publication, number in series, first words of the story, and a list of chapter titles. These last two are to use as guides to reprints since the titles were often changed. On some cards additional data must be entered: names of villains, which stories this one relates to, names of assistants, descriptions of Nick Carter and his home, details of his arsenal in the war against crime, interesting phrases, and many other things that have significance only in the fevered brain of the scholar.

Problems have arisen beyond the mere bulk of the bibliographical aspects. Questions that may never be fully answered include the reasons behind the great number of reprints.

Of the 282 issues of the NICK CARTER LIBRARY, 42 were reprints, leaving only 240 original stories. Figures aren't completed for the rest of the weeklies, but through NICK CARTER WEEKLY No. 315, 84 stories are reprinted from NICK CARTER LIBRARY (10 had appeared twice in NCL so this makes the third appearance), and 6 are reprints of earlier numbers in the same series of WEEKLIES. That makes only 225 original stories so far as that Weekly is concerned. All the weeklies were grist for the mill of the MAGNET and NEW MAGNET LIBRARIES, where novels were made from linking two or more novelettes and whole serials from the NEW YORK WEEKLY saw print once more. There were 78 Nick Carter serials (at least two were by Nick Carter but not about him) appearing up to 1915 when the WEEKLY ceased publication and made room for the pulp magazines. There were also 115 short stories, the last one appearing in 1903. Titles like THE GREAT OPIUM CASE, ONE SHIPWRECK TOO MANY, and THE HATE THAT KILLS became one volume novels in the MAGNET LIBRARY. Were any of the serials cut for this purpose? Only further investigation shall reveal all. Further investigation shall also reveal if there were many changes when stories in the MAGNET LIBRARY reappeared in the NEW MAGNET. One interesting change has already been found; THE OLD DETECTIVE'S PUPIL has the same sub-title in the MAGNET LIBRARY that it had as a serial in the NEW YORK WEEKLY ("The Mysterious Crime of Madison Square"). It also had a frontispiece showing "Nick Carter in various disguises." In the NEW MAGNET LIBRARY, the sub-title has been changed to "On the Side of Law and Order" and there is no frontispiece.

Questions about which authors were responsible for which stories may never be completely resolved and should furnish fuel for many an argument around the fire in the years ahead. How much control the editor had over a sequence (which villain

to bring back, which assistants were most popular, whether to continue the "Detective School Series" for a few more issues) or whether it was left entirely to the author is also difficult to resolve. Whose decision was it to start the MAGNET LIBRARY and who decided which stories to reprint and in which order and why?

Part of the fascination of Nick Carter is watching the influence of real historical events and real historical people on the stories: the Russo-Japanese War, Theodore Roosevelt, Inspector Byrnes. What other events and persons, little-alluded to today may have shaped the destiny and deeds of Nick Carter? What was the influence on Nick Carter by other detective stories not published in dime novels? What influence (if any) did Nick Carter exert on detective fiction and his readers? Why did Nick Carter remain popular long after other fictional figures passed from sight? Only Sexton Blake has had a longer run—a nearly unbroken series of stories since 1893. Questions to be pondered and perhaps answered.

Look at his name: Nicholas (Nick) Carter. Aristocratic yet American. Polished yet tough. Nick: The tough guy who won't back down. Carter: the man of breeding and education. Nick Carter. A happy choice of syllables, rolls on the tongue and sticks in the mind. Easy to say and easy to remember. A reader knew what to ask for: a book by Nick Carter about Nick Carter.

Note: The Hess Collection is lacking some issues of the NEW YORK WEEKLY, NICK CARTER LIBRARY and NICK CARTER WEEKLY. Data is needed on the following:

NCL: 2, 93, 103, 105-106, 109-110, 112-116, 118-121, 123-124, 126, 128, 131-134, 137-145, 147, 149-151, 155-161, 165, 167-169, 171-177, 179, 181-183, 185, 187-189, 191-192, 195, 197-206, 208, 212-218, 221, 223-224, 233-236, 243, 245, 247, 250-254, 256-257, 260-262, 264-266, 268, 270, 272, 276, 278, 280, 282.

NCW: 81, 96, 144, 308, 310, 312.

If anyone has any of these, and has

the time to help, I would appreciate getting the data on 3x5 cards: title, date of issue, first few words of story (first sentence or, case of one of those 'shocker' openings like "Murder! Help!", the first paragraph), chapter title list. Of course I am also looking for copies to be bought and donated to the Hess Collection once this project is finished, as well as titles in these and other parts of the Carter Saga for my own collection. But this wasn't meant as an advertisement in that sense. Any issues of the NEW YORK WEEKLY (1886-1915) are required. Hess has quite a few, but it is mostly those with short stories which are represented.

DETECTIVE STORY MAGAZINE, NICK CARTER MAGAZINE, those few issues of AINSLEE'S, CLUES, THE SHADOW: much data needed and many issues. Information is lacking on just which issues of DETECTIVE STORY had Nick Carter stories. The issue of March 5, 1918, is a definite must for this project and for any collector. The issue preceding it advertises that it will include an article: "Reminiscences of Nick Carter," by John R. Coryell.

The game is afoot, as Sherlock Holmes once said.

RECENTLY PUBLISHED ARTICLES CONCERNING DIME NOVELS

SPORTS ILLUSTRATED, April 23, 1962. A SNEERING LAUGH WITH THE BASES LOADED, by Robert Cantwell. A review of boys books about baseball from dime novels to the stories by Ralph Barbour. Illustrated by Beadles Half Dime Library No. 416, a baseball story. The writer needed more information about dime

novels. Some of his statements in this field are not accurate. (This article was brought to my attention by Frank Acker.)

FOR SALE

Secret Service Nos. 725, 492, 851, 722, 1026 70c each. Detective Library Nos. 600, 569, 499, 614, 564, 746 \$3.50 each.

WANTED

Secret Service, Frank Reade Weekly, and Young Klondike.

Roy Morris

901 E. Michigan, Orlando, Fla.

WANTED

Street & Smith Detective Story Magazines 1915-1933. Quote price and state condition. Also wanted, Nicholas Carter items.

John Machen

6331 Belair Road

Baltimore, Md. 21206

Back numbers Reckless Ralph's Dime Novel Roundup, Nos. 1 to 237, some reprints, 12 for \$1.00 or all for \$21. Sent postpaid. You also get Dime Novel Catalogue, Birthday No. 2, indexes, #1 Pioneer and Scouts of the West.

Can you beat it?

Ralph F. Cummings

161 Pleasant St.

So. Grafton, Mass. 01560

FOR SALE

Liberty Boys, Work & Win, Tip Top, Secret Service, Pluck & Luck, Merriwell Series, Snaps, Medal Library, and others. Early and later issues. Send want list.

Guinon

Box 214, Little Rock, Ark. 72203

MEMBERSHIP CHANGES

- 293. George Hart, 140 Ritner Street, Philadelphia, Pa. 19148 (Former mem.)
- 181. James D. Thueson, Publisher, 410 Groveland, Minneapolis, Minn. 55403 (New address)
- 294. Brian W. Dippie, 1100 Post Oak #205, Austin, Texas 78704 (New mem.)
- 93. Tom Moriarty, 1635 Washington Ave., Seaford, N. Y. 11783 (New add.)
- 100. Woodrow Gelman, 90 Gold Place, Malverne, N. Y. 11565 (New address)
- 295. O. B. Holder, 541 23rd St. N. W., Massillon, Ohio 44646 (New member)
- 296. Alton Robert Cogert, Race Brook Road & Rinnon, Woodbridge, Conn. 06525 (New member)